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THE EARLY LIFE OF CATHERINE THE GREAT.

THERE never was a greater contrast presented in the life of any woman than that which appears in the life of Catherine of Russia, the wife of the great Peter. In her youth we find innocence, virtue, courage and self-denial, fortitude in adversity, and equanimity in good fortune and elevation. But what shall we say of those later years in which great talents and a commanding will were sullied by excesses such as no female sovereign has ever been guilty of since the days of Messalina—cruelty which was never relieved by remorse, and a thousand shameful and violent deeds, which utterly unsexed and degraded the perpetrator?

She was born in a village near the little town of Dorpal, in Livonia. She was the only child of her parents, poor peasants, who had nothing to bequeath her but their virtues. She was still very young when her father died, leaving her widowed and decrepid mother entirely dependent upon her for support. Nobly did she fulfil her task. They lived in a small cottage with mud walls, and thatched with straw; and, while Catharine worked with her needle all day long, the old woman read some pious book, as well as her feeble sight would allow; and when night fell, too poor or too frugal to light a candle, they sat round their fire talking, and were content and happy.

Catherine excited great admiration in her neighbourhood. She was tall, her figure was symmetrical, her skin was white as driven snow, and her face was “the fairest that e'er the sun shone on.” She walked to perfection;—the coquetry, and withal the grace and stateliness of her pace, were the envy of the village maidens, who all endeavoured to imitate her. But there were some things in which it was not easy to imitate her. She evidently set very little value upon bodily charms as compared with mental acquirements. Her mother had taught her to read; the old Lutheran minister of the parish had instructed her in the truths of religion; and to these advantages she added quick observation, sound judgment, and a strong but well-trained imagination. She got many offers of marriage from peasants in the neighbourhood, but declined them all, declaring she could not leave her mother. But the latter died when she was but sixteen, and she then gave up the cottage, and sought an asylum in the house of the minister, as governess of his children. So great was her vivacity, her amiability, and her prudence, that he came to love her as his own daughter, and employed masters to teach her music and dancing, and every other accomplishment that could add to her charms. These were the happiest days of Catherine's life. A pure and simple heart beat within her breast; she was budding into womanhood, and surrounded by every fascinating grace. The time passed along pleasantly, teaching the children their lessons, talking with the good pastor, reading, singing, dancing, gardening. Oh, what a pleasant vision to the maiden's fancy was the great future and the great world, which lay outside the walls of the parson's modest dwelling!

But “fine times,” says the proverb, “do not last always.” The minister died, his household was broken up, and Catherine once more found herself cast alone upon the world. But not helpless. She was a brave girl, and was nothing daunted, though Livonia was at that time utterly desolated by the war which was raging between the Swedes and Russians with frightful fury. Lawless marauders and brutal soldiers crowded every highway, and spread terror and confusion through every dwelling. Food was every day becoming scarcer, and Catherine made up her mind to go to Marienburg, a large town, where she hoped to find plenty and employment. Marienburg, be it remembered, was some days' journey distant; the way lay through a dreary, desolate country, and the hostile forces were ravaging it in every direction. Fancy what a stout heart she must have had then, when she set out on her journey on foot, her wardrobe tied up in a bundle, a small sum of money in her pocket, and without knowing a soul in the town to which she was going. And yet this she did. One evening towards sunset, just as

she was about to seek lodgings for the night in a neighbouring farmhouse, she found herself face to face with two soldiers, who seized her, and commenced, notwithstanding her cries and entreaties, using her very brutally. She was becoming exhausted, when a young officer appeared upon the scene, and immediately upon seeing him the soldiers took to their heels and made their escape. What was Catherine's surprise and delight to find in her deliverer the son of her old friend the Lutheran minister. Never was meeting more opportune. Not to mention the predicament in which he found her placed by the soldiers, her money was almost expended in paying the expenses of her journey, and she was looking forward to entering the town penniless. The officer, however, replenished her purse, procured her a horse, and gave her letters of introduction to some of his friends, amongst others to a M. Gluck, who held some official post in Marienburg. She accordingly presented herself at his house, received a cordial welcome, and on the following day was installed in his family as governess of his two daughters, who had lost their mother. Though she was still but seventeen, she discharged the duties of her new office to perfection; and was so graceful, intelligent and captivating, that she robbed poor Gluck of his heart, and he begged of her to take his hand as well. What was the surprise of the dignitary when she refused him!—aye, and refused him with the dignity of a queen,—refused him as she had refused the peasants of Dorpat, two years previously,—she, the orphan and outcast, who had so lately come to his door, way-worn and desolate!

Probably, our readers now think that Catherine already heard the whisperings of ambition, and that she had a secret presentiment of the great elevation that awaited her. Nothing of the kind. Let us do her justice; she refused to marry M. Gluck for a reason that all ladies will appreciate and approve—because she loved another, and that other, neither king nor emperor, but a poor subaltern officer, without fortune or influence, with but one arm, and hacked and shattered from head to foot with bayonet and ball, the son of her old benefactor, the same who had succoured and delivered her when desolate and sore afraid. Ah! Catherine was still a woman, brave, single, and true.

She immediately left M. Gluck's house, and when the officer returned to Marienburg, somehow or other they came to know that each loved the other, and they agreed to get married. Their nuptials were celebrated with a great deal of simple rejoicing, but on that very evening, the town was attacked by the Russians, and the bridegroom left the altar to rush to the battery.

He never returned. Whether killed or captured, Catherine never knew, but she never saw him more, and thus found herself a widow and a bride within twelve short hours. She watched that night in sorrow and anxiety, and the morrow came, and another and another, and the siege raged with undiminished fury, till at last the town was carried by assault, and the Russian hordes spared neither age nor sex. When the slaughter was over, Catherine was found hidden in an oven. In the division of the booty, she was allotted to a soldier as a slave. She had lost her property, her husband, and all her friends, and now at last had lost her liberty. But even this new misfortune did not subdue her. She was still cheerful, pious, and resigned, and her lofty and calm dignity awed the brutal men, who surrounded her, into gentleness and humanity. The fame of her beauty reached the ears of the Russian general, Prince Menschikoff. He saw her, purchased her, and placed her in his household under the care of his sister. Here she grew in beauty, both of feature and character, as she grew in years. She was a favourite with everybody. Shortly afterwards the Czar, Peter the Great, visited the prince at his house. Catherine was ordered to hand round some fruit, and her appearance astonished the emperor. He went away thoughtful, and returning on the morrow, asked to see her. He heard the simple story of her life with deep interest, was captivated by her charms and her heroism, and married her. The Livonian peasant girl was now on the throne of a great empire.